

The University of Chicago

ROBERT J. BRECKINRIDGE
AND THE SLAVERY ASPECT OF THE
PRESBYTERIAN SCHISM OF 1837

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE SOCIAL
SCIENCES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
1932

By
EDMUND ARTHUR MOORE

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EDMUND A. MOORE

*Connecticut State College
Storrs, Connecticut*

The stories of the great Methodist and Baptist slavery schisms have found a place in the general histories of the United States. That there was, also, a major schism in the decade of the thirties in the Presbyterian church is fairly well known, yet few students of American history have demonstrated much discriminating knowledge of the two large bodies of Presbyterians that existed for thirty years after, and as the result of this schism. The great cleavage in the Presbyterian church, known as the Old School-New School schism, has been presented as the result of a struggle which was concerned almost exclusively with doctrine and ecclesiastical government. The struggle was, to a large degree, of a theological nature. Opposition to the New England influence, operating through the once popular Plan of Union, goes far to account for the fury with which Robert J. Breckinridge and others who represented the Scotch-Irish element in the church battled against more liberal tendencies. The upshot of the fight, the "cutting off" of two-fifths of the church in 1837-38, need not be recounted here.¹

The great importance of the theological and ecclesiastical controversy should not be allowed to obscure the fact that the slavery issue had its part in the schism. The history of the denomination during the first half of the nineteenth century requires further and broader study before a satisfactory picture of the full part which slavery played in this division can be drawn. The material at hand, which grew out of a study of Robert J. Breckinridge, the leader perhaps most immediately responsible for the schism of 1837, is presented here as a small

¹ See R. E. Thompson, *A History of the Presbyterian Churches in the United States*, chs. X, XI.

part of the total evidence which should be assembled on this subject.²

Robert J. Breckinridge was the scion of an illustrious tradition and of a family which numbered

Senators, Representatives . . . Judges, Lawyers, Colonels, Governors, Foreign Ministers and Preachers. . . .³

To this list might have been added that of Attorney General, an office held under Jefferson by Robert's own father, John Breckinridge. Robert's mother was a strong-minded woman and a devout Christian. Three of her sons, William, John, and Robert had grown to manhood in years when Kentucky was the center of almost continuous religious revivals, and all three became Presbyterian clergymen. William was a leader of the orthodox in Kentucky, where he published for a time a periodical, a large share of whose columns were used to support the policies championed by his bolder brother Robert. John, a figure of rare charm, endowed with more human charity and sweetness than Robert, was no less devoted to orthodoxy. His short career reached a high point in his notable debates with Bishop John Hughes on the relative merits of Presbyterianism and Catholicism in a democratic state.

In 1834, when Robert Breckinridge burst forth, rather than emerged, as the parliamentary leader of the Old School forces in the Presbyterian church, he had left behind him a promising, if short, secular career. Educated at Yale and Union, Breckinridge had been trained for the law. Elected to the Kentucky House of Representatives by a Blue Grass district he served during a period in which the state was rocked almost to the point of civil war by the "Court Struggle." In this contest between the champions of the masses and the defenders of the rights of property it is significant that Breckinridge championed the conservative cause. Re-election to the House in 1828 was followed by an almost fatal sickness, a condition which gave his brother, John, an opportunity to renew ardent pleas for Robert's salvation and dedication to the church. With earnestness John sought to save and redirect his brother's life:

2 This article draws in considerable part from a chapter of "The Earlier Life of Robert J. Breckinridge, 1800-1845," the writer's doctoral dissertation in the Department of History, University of Chicago, 1932.

3 O. Brown to Breckinridge, Dec. 24, 1824. Breckinridge MSS., in Library of Congress.

You are no half-way-man in anything. It is not your nature to be a driveller; a milk and water man—or Christian—you will not be a bold politician . . . a clear and admired lawyer⁴

Though Breckinridge's conversion followed soon after, he did not at once forsake his political ambitions. His new interest in moral and religious questions is clearly reflected, however, in the platform on which he offered himself in 1830, when he last ran for re-election to the Kentucky House. He demanded stricter laws to regulate the "Sunday Mails." More pertinent to this study was the great zeal he then showed for the emancipation and the colonization of the slaves.

It seems to have been more than a mere coincidence that Breckinridge made his first important public anti-slavery stand very soon after his conversion. As an evidence of his sincerity he acted to free his own slaves.⁵ He contributed to the press a series of anti-slavery articles entitled "Hints on Slavery." Since both Breckinridge and the slavery problem were about to intrude or assert themselves in Presbyterian councils, the high ground which the brilliant young leader occupied in 1830 with respect to slavery warrants attention. His discussion of the issue is surcharged with a broad democratic and idealistic spirit. The attack on slavery is supported by both philosophical and religious arguments. "Slavery," Breckinridge declared, "is at war with the principles of every species of social system." He was sure that, of the half million white Kentuckians, not four hundred had an interest in maintaining the institution. From this estimate he drew a conclusion that strikes a distinctly modern note:

In a free government, so small a minority should be very cautious in trusting to their own impartiality and justice, in a case where they consider their property involved, when the great mass of their fellow men

4 John Breckinridge to Robert J. Breckinridge, Mar. 31, 1829.

5 In 1833 ninety-six blacks were sent from Kentucky to Liberia by the Colonization Society; of these, eleven were slaves freed by Breckinridge. Together with this gift Breckinridge furnished "considerable money and supplies for their maintenance after their arrival in Africa." Martin, Asa E., *The Anti-slavery Movement in Kentucky Prior to 1850*; Louisville, 1917, 59. Yet it appears that in the next year he owned slaves not provided for in any scheme of future emancipation, and a minister suggested that his words would gain force if he would follow his brother William's example in freeing his slaves. (Steel to R. J. B., Dec. 25, 1834.) Whatever the exact status of all his slaves in 1834, an Emancipation Deed indicates that early in 1835 Breckinridge provided that his mature slaves should all be free within a few years and the younger ones upon attaining the age of twenty-five. (Copy of the Emancipation Deed, dated Jan. 13, 1835.) His motive was stated to be "an earnest desire to obey the gospel of God and add to the happiness of all mankind"

differ from them in their views of the welfare and grandeur of the Commonwealth.⁶

To this challenge to a great property interest Breckinridge called to his support the precepts both of religion and of the Declaration of Independence:

You may take man at his birth, and by an adequate system make him a slave—a brute—a demon. This is man's work. The light of reason, history and philosophy—the voice of nature and religion—the spirit of God himself proclaims that the being he created in his own image he must have created free.⁷

Though some points in the "Hints" intimated the possibility of radical action it is not surprising that it was the plan of gradualism, colonization, that enlisted the support of the young border state politician. One aspect of colonization had a peculiar hold on Breckinridge's newly quickened religious nature:

As a grand missionary operation, it commends itself in a peculiar manner to the Christian community, who fail not to discover in it the hand of that presiding Providence, which, having permitted the wretched African to be enslaved and christianized, now demands his restoration that he may christianize his brethren.⁸

In the early thirties Breckinridge made great forward strides in the church. Though his defeat for re-election to the Kentucky House was in no sense the direct cause of his entrance into the ministry, it did, at least, facilitate the transition to the profession of his brothers. After a few months at Princeton Seminary and but three years' service in a Baltimore pastorate, his name was known widely in church circles. A continuous campaign against the Catholics, in the "Seat of the Beast," did not prevent him from taking a leading rôle in the theological battle against the New School. In 1834, by his authorship of the famous "*Act and Testimony*"—dubbed by its enemies the "The Test Act"—Breckinridge became the acknowledged leader, in action if not in profundity of theological thinking, in the Old School camp.

The ecclesiastical and theological controversy needs no re-statement here, but the position of the church on slavery, prior to 1873, may need brief review. Like those of other denominations, the early declarations of the Presbyterians reflect fairly well the prevailing revolutionary and humanitarian philosophy

6 *Kentucky Reporter*, May 5, 1830.

7 *Ibid.*, May 19, 1830.

8 *Kentucky Reporter*, May 14, 1830. See Breckinridge's *Address Before the Colonization Society of Kentucky* (Jan., 1831) for a fuller statement of his colonization ideas.

of the Jeffersonian era. The pronouncement which became the focal point of later discussion was the Declaration of 1818. In this document the Presbyterian General Assembly denounced slavery as "inconsistent with the law of God, and totally irreconcilable with the gospel of Christ."⁹

The Declaration of 1818 was the last significant slavery pronouncement by a Presbyterian General Assembly for well over two decades. Subsequent Assemblies not only ceased to speak out against the institution but were charged with imposing silence on the dangerous subject. To many the forces of unity and conservatism seemed to be working out their ends through a craven application of the gag rule. Leaders in the North, zealous for the unity of the church, determined to meet the growing radicalism by an insistence that the "civil" and "moral" aspects of slavery were distinguishable and that the church refrain from legislation on the "civil" phase. The influential Charles Hodge so advised, and Princeton, with its great authority throughout the church, voiced the doctrine of no action. Its organ, the *Biblical Repertory*, proclaimed that

. . . . The opinion that slave-holding is itself a crime must operate to produce the disunion of the states and the division of all ecclesiastical bodies in this country. We shall become two nations in feeling, which must soon render us two nations in fact. With regard to the church, its operation will be much more summary. If slaveholding is a heinous crime, slave holders must be excluded from the church. . . . Should the general assembly adopt it, the church is *ipso facto*, divided . . .¹⁰

The North was advised "to follow the example of Christ in the manner of treating slavery," and the South was enjoined to follow His precepts in the treatment of slaves "and both will have reason to rejoice in the result."¹¹ Little wonder that men with quickened anti-slavery convictions deplored the teaching of "this doctrine to students in Princeton Seminary," where were trained so many of the leaders of the church for the North and for the South.¹²

In the early thirties Breckinridge's disbelief in the institution of slavery found expression in a participation in the colonization movement. He identified himself actively with the Maryland Colonization Society. Accompanied by his brother

9 Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

10 The *Biblical Repertory*, 12:301 (Apr., 1836).

11 *Ibid.*, p. 305.

12 Thomas, Thomas E., *Correspondence of Thomas Ebenezer Thomas, Mainly Relating to the Anti-slavery Conflict in Ohio, Especially in the Presbyterian Church*. Dayton, Ohio, 1909, 115-117.

John, and representing the Maryland Society as agent, he undertook a speaking tour through New England. The results of this venture were such as to bring disillusionment to the Breckinridges. Accompanied by two "African princes" they found themselves subjected to suspicion and threats of attack. To the abolitionists, the Breckinridges were allies of the slaveholder, while the masses looked upon them as disturbers. Seeking a church hall in Boston, they were warned by the mayor that they "would certainly be mobbed" if they spoke.

Perhaps it was inevitable that all this should react upon, and somewhat modify, that crusading anti-slavery spirit which had found so clear and radical an expression in the strong words which Breckinridge had penned during the Kentucky campaign of 1830. After the New England tour of 1834, Breckinridge became an object of such execration to Garrison that the latter singled out the Maryland colonizationist for special abuse. With his usual unfairness or lack of balance Garrison quoted for his own purposes part of an address which Breckinridge had made early in 1834. Breckinridge, wrote Garrison, had said that the colonizationists

stand in the breach for . . . the slaveholder . . . to keep off the Abolitionist. We are his friends . . .¹³

But the abolitionist leader failed to allow Breckinridge to complete his own statement which made it clear that this defense of the slaveholder was "only to give him time . . . if he attempts to maintain slavery as perpetual, every one of us will be upon him too."¹⁴

In 1836, while travelling in England, Breckinridge engaged in a long series of debates on "American Slavery" with the British abolitionist, George Thompson. Breckinridge's speeches on this occasion show clearly the imprint of the savage thrusts made upon him by the abolitionists. Though he spoke sincerely against slavery, the emotional warmth of his earlier stand against the institution had cooled to allow room for his new wrath against the anti-slavery extremists. From a belief that slavery was inconsistent with every respectable social system he had come to the view that it could co-exist with any form of society. Of one thing he was certain: although slavery was con-

¹³ *Liberator*, August 20, 1834.

¹⁴ Fox, Earle, *American Colonization Society*, 169; *African Repository*, 14:137 ff. In the weeks following the visit of the Breckinridges to Boston in 1834, Garrison published a series of articles on the Maryland Colonization Society's plan of "Cruelty and Oppression." *Liberator*, Aug. 9-20, 1834.

trary to the spirit of Christianity, the triumph of abolitionism would strike a death blow to religion and to country. Yet it would be unfair to infer that Breckinridge had surrendered his principles of opposition to human slavery. His was rather the case of a man who, while combatting one evil, now found himself denounced and reviled by what he not unnaturally regarded as an even more insidious and destructive force. He was satisfied that abolitionism was the more immediately dangerous foe to church and state alike.

While there were many Presbyterians whose approach to the problem was the same as Breckinridge's, there were others who were determined to translate the anti-slavery phraseology of the Declaration of 1818 into definite action by the church to purge itself of slavery. For some years prior to 1837 local church judicatories had been addressing anti-slavery petitions to the General Assemblies, but the common practice had been promptly to lay such documents on the table. In the Assembly of 1835, however, they were referred to a committee which was instructed to report to the next Assembly.¹⁵ The chairman of the committee was Dr. Samuel Miller of Princeton, who was said to have instructed his students that any preaching they might do on slavery ought to be done "with caution."

The report of Dr. Miller's committee was made to the Assembly of 1836, which was organized under New School control. The report reflected the then essentially conservative attitude of both parties in the church. It declared that since slavery was "inseparably connected" with state laws, since there existed "great diversity of opinion . . . in the churches represented in this Assembly . . ." and since "any action on the part of this Assembly would tend to distract and divide our churches . . . Resolved, that it is not expedient for the Assembly to take any further order in relation to this subject." A radical minority report, the work of the one abolitionist on the committee, was challenged by a resolution from the floor which aimed to commit the Assembly to the doctrine that slavery had Biblical sanction and was a subject outside the legislative power of the Assembly. To end this dangerous business, Dr. James Hoge introduced a resolution for postponing any action. This passed

15 Gillett, Ezra Hall, *History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, 2:524, n. 2.

by a large majority.¹⁶ An analysis of the vote on the resolution shows that vigorous abolitionists like John Rankin and Elijah P. Lovejoy united with staunch defenders of slavery in a vain effort to force some sort of action.

Declarations by synods and presbyteries further illustrate the increasing sectional strain in the Presbyterian church. Three of the four synods that were to be voted out of the church in 1837 had passed resolutions, not long before, demanding disciplinary action against slave holders.¹⁷ At the other extreme, late in 1836 a number of southern presbyteries and synods adopted resolutions of a nature which makes it impossible to regard as alarmists those who prophesied a sectional division in the church over slavery—of the sort which overwhelmed the Methodists and the Baptists a few years later. A presbytery in South Carolina resolved that “the existence of slavery is not opposed to the will of God . . .,”¹⁸ while the Synod of South Carolina resolved, for the enlightenment of northern anti-slavery “heresiarchs,” that

slavery had existed from the days of those good old slave-holders and patriots, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; that the existence of slavery is not opposed to the will of God, and whosoever has a conscience too tender to recognize this relation as lawful, is righteous over much, is wise above what is written . . . and leaves the infallible word of God for the fancies and doctrines of men.¹⁹

More significant is the declaration of the Synod of Virginia that though

the likelihood of the necessity of a geographical division, through the operation of this fanaticism, is not so great as it was some time ago; yet on this subject . . . a . . . vigilance . . . is our manifest duty.

It is worth noting that it is not heresy but “fanaticism” which

16 The resolution, which carried 154 to 87, declared that “inasmuch as the constitution of the Presbyterian Church . . . declares that no Church Judicatory ought to pretend to make laws, to bind the conscience, in virtue of their own authority; and as the urgency of the business of the Assembly, and the shortness of time . . . render it impossible to deliberate and decide judiciously on the subject of slavery in its relation to the church; therefore resolved, that this whole subject be indefinitely postponed.” *Minutes of the General Assembly, 1836*, pp. 272, 273; *Biblical Repertory*, July 1836, pp. 440, 441. Birney, in *The American Churches the Bulwarks of American Slavery*, (p. 36) states that during the sessions of the Assembly the southern delegates met apart and resolved not to submit should the Assembly do anything to make slavery “an immorality.” No confirmatory evidence of such a meeting has been found and it is possible that Birney may have confused this with the Old School Convention of 1837.

17 Crocker, Zebulon, *The Catastrophe of the Presbyterian Church in 1837*, p. 65.

18 Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

19 Crocker, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

the synod feared might divide the church. That the New School "heretics" had far more than their proportionate share of anti-slavery "fanatics" is beyond dispute, nor is it improbable that the possibility of being rid of two evils at a single stroke was carefully weighed by some southern Presbyterian leaders.

The leading Old School delegates to the Assembly met in a special convention at Philadelphia in May, 1837, a few days before the meeting of the General Assembly. At this convention it soon appeared that the South would furnish large support for the Old School and that unless the support of the section were lost as a result of some move against slavery, the Old School would have an excellent chance to control the Assembly. It is unnecessary to suppose that a plot existed to excommunicate members or to "cut off" whole synods especially identified with hostility to slavery, yet some of the southern Old School leaders no doubt realized that a cutting of the tie that bound several of the northern synods to the church would have social as well as doctrinal advantages and significance.²⁰

The speeches made at the Old School convention lead to the conclusion that the purposes of some of those who met there were by no means confined to matters of dogma and church government. Breckinridge, to be sure, assured his fellow delegates that the convention's purpose was restricted to matters of "doctrine and order—the quintessence of Presbyterianism"²¹; but this statement expressed the hope of its author rather than what was plainly in the minds of some of the southern delegates. There is ample evidence to support the conclusion that some of the latter, both clergy and laity, went to the convention determined to demand support for slavery or, this failing, complete silence on the subject. The problem was both complex and simple. For northern or border state Old School Presbyterians with anti-slavery convictions and commitments, it was genuinely complex and disturbing to convictions. On the other hand, for southern pro-slavery orthodox leaders such as Baxter and Plummer the issue was simple. To such, the presence of the New School party in the church, certainly its dominance in the As-

20 In 1836 the membership of the Presbyterian church was 220,557, of which all but 57,309 were in the North, giving the South but 21% of the total. In 1838, as a result of the schism, the South had 53,792 members of a total Old South membership of 177,665. The South had now 30% of the total. These figures have been compiled from reports of the presbyteries to the General Assembly. See *Minutes of the General Assembly*, 1836, and 1838.

21 *Western Presbyterian Herald*, June 1, 1837.

sembly, was doubly dangerous, while the subjugation of that party, or its removal from the church, would bring doctrinal purity and would serve to strengthen the church against a complete sectional division over slavery.

Southern members of the convention made it plain that they were in theological agreement with Breckinridge. However, though this consideration would be of vital importance were there to be a real test of strength between the Old and New School forces in the Assembly, it is plain from several of the speeches made in the convention that there would be little prospect of establishing Old School control over the Assembly unless the southern members of the convention were first reassured as to that party's stand on slavery. It is plain that when Dr. Baxter represented southern Old School opinion as showing "unanimity on one point,—that is, that the connection with northern Associations is injurious, anti-Presbyterian, and ought to come to an end," he referred to the slavery issue as well as to matters of doctrine.²²

The southern position was voiced most forcefully by Dr. William S. Plumer of Virginia. Insisting that "all we ask is that the Supreme Judicatory do nothing in the way of legislation on . . . slavery . . .," he followed with a long list of reasons why that body should "not . . . touch it in any way of legislation." Several of these are worth special mention. Plumer insisted that the Assembly lacked the legal power to legislate on slavery. He thought it "incredible that . . . it was ever contemplated to censure what was a common practice . . . action would be unconstitutional . . ." After voicing the common argument that slavery was not contrary to Christ's teachings, Plumer proceeded to warn that to legislate on the subject would involve the church in politics.

One of Plumer's points is particularly instructive in relation to the large problem of the relationship of slavery to the schism. Something of the manner in which the determination to resist abolitionism reinforced the conviction that the Scriptures enjoined separation from those who were deemed to have abandoned the standards of the church appears in these words:

In a delegated body as large as the Assembly there will always be some who avail themselves of the opportunity . . . to make . . . insulting speeches. . . . We have no idea of needlessly permitting ourselves to be placed in a situation so unpleasant . . . should the Assembly . . . legislate

²² *Ibid.*, June 1, 1837.

and decide that slaveholding is a sin, then, of course, the persons who should thus vote, would wish the Southern churches cut off for immorality, and the Southern churches would all feel themselves instructed by the Apostle Paul to "withdraw from such." . . . Thus our church would be rent asunder, and Southern and Northern Presbyterians and Congregationalists could no longer meet, even in a social way, and hail each other as brethren. . . . Well, the work of division thus begun must go on, and soon another, and another, and yet another denomination will divide North and South. . . . Then nothing is left . . . except to . . . rend the star-spangled banner in twain. . . . Can it be that the righteous Judge of all the earth has so dreadful a controversy with the Presbyterian Church of the United States as to give her up to the folly and madness of being the first to hoist the gate and let the flood of desolation roll in!²³

Indeed, if the picture here drawn sums up what many in the convention believed—and there is no reason to suppose the contrary—it seems reasonable to believe that those who carried out the harsh measures of 1837 did so from a strange mixture of motives and that among these should be listed not only abhorrence of "heresy" and abolitionism but also the conviction that they were best serving the interests of country.

The general situation suggested the need for concessions, particularly to the southern side. If the Old School party were to reverse its minority status in the Assembly no one "sound" in dogma but moderately anti-slavery could well be alienated. Those most interested in the ecclesiastical and theological controversy *per se* were concerned that their party should suffer no losses as a result of the slavery issue. It was likewise incumbent on southern leaders, who were desirous that there be a separation from the New School, that they be content with silence on the slavery question. To have insisted that the Assembly of 1837 abandon the Declaration of 1818 in favor of one more favorable to the South would have been very dangerous.

Breckinridge was much concerned for fear slavery would "trench on the greater controversy, and absorb it, as Aaron's rod devoured all the other rods."²⁴ In an earnest appeal to the members of the convention he laid before them his own real dilemma and, further, pointed out the only possible program for cooperation between Old School Presbyterians who, though agreed on dogma, could not see eye to eye on slavery:

I cannot unsay what our fathers said. We must not be asked to. . . . Let not our brethren come to us, in the time of trouble, and offer to assist us, only on the condition of our changing. We . . . must not be asked to

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

change old Presbyterian principles on the subject of slavery. It is ruinous to the souls of men and to the truth to make such a demand at the price of laboring together with us. . . . I deprecate the introduction of the subject:—I will not recede from what my fathers did—but I will not lay any other burden on my brethren.²⁵

It would be unprofitable here to recite the charges and re-criminations that were made by Presbyterians, by other church people and particularly by the non-churchly concerning the alleged sinister motives that underlay the Presbyterian schism of 1837. It is not necessary to credit all of these charges at face value in order to reach the conclusion that this schism involved the issue of slavery to a far greater extent than has been recognized in modern discussion of the subject, though the essential truth of the matter was stated by Gillett in 1864.²⁶ Whatever the intent of the leaders who were responsible for the schism, it is plain that the great division of 1837 left a Presbyterian (Old School) church definitely more conservative on the slavery issue than the Presbyterian church had been prior to the schism.²⁷

25 *Ibid.* How far the Assembly of 1837 went to placate the South may be seen in portions of its "Circular Letter" and its "Narrative of the State of Religion." The latter voiced the opinion that slaves are "providentially placed among us; and their circumstances call upon us for that moral and religious instruction which will conduce to their happiness, and prepare them to perform their duties as men and Christians. The prayer of every benevolent heart should ascend to God for their best interests, and especially that all classes of them may be delivered from that worst of bondage the thralldom of sin and Satan." The dominance of an extreme social conservatism in the Old School organization, for the next generation, is well foreshadowed in the following extract from the "Circular Letter":

One of the most formidable evils of the present crisis is the wide spread and ever restless spirit of *radicalism*, manifest both in the church and in the state. Its leading principle everywhere seems to be to level all order to the dust. Mighty only in power to destroy, it has driven its deep agitations through the bosom of our beloved church. Amidst the multiplied and revolting forms in which it has appeared, it is always animated by one principle. It is ever the same levelling revolutionary spirit, and tends to the same ruinous results. It has, in succession, driven to extreme fanaticism the great cause of revivals of religion, of temperance, and of the rights of man.

Minutes of the General Assembly, 1837, pp. 507, 509-510. There is an indication of how faithful the Presbyterian Church (Old School) remained to this social philosophy in a tribute by the great South Carolinian, Thornwell, a decade later. Thornwell characterized the stand of the Old School as "wise, moderate, and scriptural . . . based upon . . . the only ground upon which the religious denominations of the country, if not the country itself, can be saved from division and disunion." *Southern Presbyterian Review*, Dec. 1848, pp. 311, 328.

26 Gillett, *op. cit.*, 2:522-527.

27 There is no space here to discuss the many and persistent charges which New School Presbyterians heaped upon Breckinridge for his part in the schism. His position had been a most difficult one, and the complete reconciliation of his problem impossible. "The Southern members, want us to say things in favour of slavery, which are both false and impossible; and seem resolved to press it,"

The Presbyterian schism of 1837 merits the attention of anyone who may be interested in the religious and social manifestations of sectionalism. Not sectional in the sense of the Methodist and Baptist schisms of the forties, the earlier Old School-New School division had important sectional aspects and implications. If not a direct cause of the schism, slavery was at least inextricably bound up in it. Baxter, Plumer, Breckinridge, Joshua L. Wilson²⁸—leaders with views on slavery greatly at variance—all gave a hand when the Assembly, without benefit of anaesthesia, applied the knife to sever from the body ecclesiastical those great upper portions which had been adjudged most incurable in social creed as well as in theology. The varied effects of this seemingly needless operation go beyond the bounds of this study. The most striking effect on the Old School church is clear and socially important. The schism of 1837 made of this church the most significant Protestant organization to avoid division into North and South before 1861. So important an example of unity, in a generation characterized by the severing of national bonds, deserves further study and interpretation.

he wrote his wife from the Old School Convention (May 13, 1837). As he looked back over his course in 1837, despite the many charges by New School Presbyterians that he had sacrificed zeal for emancipation to "orthodoxy," Breckinridge seemed fairly well satisfied with his stand. He wrote that "in 1837. my whole object . . . was to prevent the orthodox from introducing the question of slavery at all into the Convention or Assembly of that year. That subject was excluded—the church was saved . . ." *Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine*, 5:131 (Mar., 1839). Though it must be insisted that Breckinridge did not surrender his conviction that slavery should be put on the course of extinction yet it is true that the coincidence of a degree of radicalism with "heresy," in the case of the northern New School Presbyterians, left its imprint upon him. "What erroneous sectaries ever did anything to advance any great interest of man?" he asked. ". . . what evangelical denomination ever did real injury to any? Not one . . ." *Ibid.*, 3:307 (July, 1837). This suggests, correctly, that Breckinridge might be counted upon to extend to the limit his patience with his orthodox, but pro-slavery, brethren of the South. Renounced as a pro-slavery zealot by abolitionists, he was branded an abolitionist by extreme southerners. To one of these latter charges he returned this revealing answer: ". . . As to the matter of Slavery, to be honest with you, my dear brother, my only fear is that I have not said enough about it; that out of love to our church & to very dear brethren in the South . . . I have kept too near the outer edge of that question. I am no 'abolitionist' in the technical sense; far from it. But I love liberty . . . & pray for Slavery to be brought to an end." Breckinridge to Coit, Jan. 10, 1843.

- 28 The stormy career of the "frontier controversialist," Joshua L. Wilson, furnishes a good example of the problem which confronted those orthodox leaders who were also opposed to slavery. "Wilson was so completely absorbed in the problem of extirpating 'error' . . . that in the convention of 1837 he decided to 'let the Southern brethren manage their own concerns in their own way.'" Raymond L. Hightower. *Joshua L. Wilson, Frontier Controversialist*, University of Chicago typed Ph. D. thesis, and in *Church History*, 1933, p. 211.

